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SOMALIA ON THE HORN

A Counterpoint of Problems Confronting One of Africa's New Nations

by E. A. Bayne

Part I: The Policeman

March 1, 1960

"I wish I understood why you Americans and Europeans always assume that a dictatorship will be inevitable in Somalia," said the commandant of the Somalia national police, and he shook his head in gentle exasperation. "It just isn't a true picture.

"We are a democratic people within our own tribes; and by ourselves, the freest of individuals--free to wander this wide country with our herds with nothing between ourselves and the sky. How could a man be more free? He will not change because Somalia has become independent again."

Mohammed Abshir Mussa, the commandant, is a tall, handsome officer whose appearance is typical among the handsome, lean, and erect Somalis. His office in Mogadiscio was as neat as he and as we talked he briskly dispatched what business was

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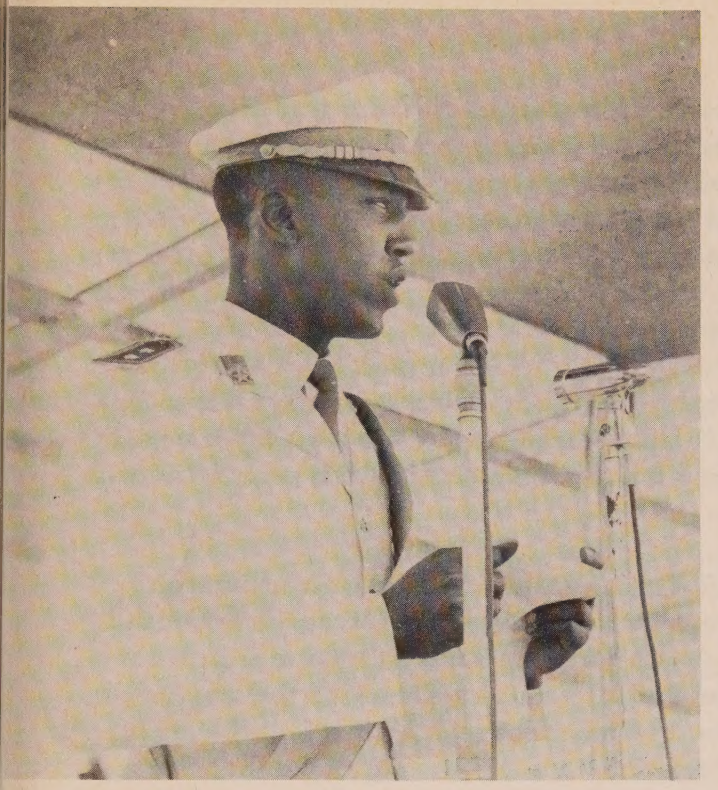
brought to him. His office looked out on a park area of palms and bougainvillaea on the other side of which stood the sprawling white government building in which "the politicians" (as he repeatedly called them) worked with the last of the Italian Trusteeship officials whose formal task will be completed on the first day of July 1960, when Somalia becomes independent. This date will mark the end of almost three-quarters of a century of continuous Italian colonialism, broken only by seven years of British occupation during and after World War II, and a final ten years of Italian Trusteeship under the United Nations. On its day of freedom the new state will undoubtedly be subject to serious and profound problems, both internal and external, both political and economic. Political dissension within, which might with greater truth be recognized as a continuation of tribal rivalries, border problems that a nomadic people inevitably encourage, and the more modern phenomenon of detribalization in urban centers with accompanying public behavior difficulties will thrust Somalia's chief of police (and the head of the country's only armed force) into a position of grave responsibility, not to mention danger for himself. In fact, logic suggests that this thirty-seven-year-old Somali holds a large measure of power in his hands and much of the early history of the new state will depend upon the nature of man that he is.

Personally he has great charm and intelligence. Both British and American observers look to him as a force for future stability and as a man of integrity in a country where integrity, at least in terms of the Protestant ethic, is not yet general. There may be some danger for him in too close an embrace with these foreigners since no matter how split Somalia may be in its tribal competition, the binding cement of the nation is nationalistic--pressed, it can become xenophobia--and the negative charge of being a British or American "agent" can be infectious.

Mohammed Abshir Mussa (his name is compounded of his own, his father's and his grandfather's, in that order) is almost disarmingly modest. When I first met him at a reception given for a group of visiting professors attending a ceremony opening a new building for Mogadiscio's fledgling university institute for law and political science, I asked him what his job was, and his response was wonderfully simple:

"I am a policeman, sir," he said in excellent English.

But Mohammed Abshir is considerably more than this. He is, first of all, an honored member of the Daarood tribe, a nomadic clan who with another of the five principal tribal groups of greater Somalia, the Hawiye, have come to dominate the government through the Somali Youth League, the largest political party. Like the SYL, the modernity of Mohammed Abshir was largely created by the influence of the British military authorities. As the son of a partially urbanized Somali, he had taken what limited education the Italian colonial administration offered during the Fascist years before the war, a matter of five years of elementary schooling. When the British ousted the reluctant



Somalia's Police Commandant:
Mohammed Abshir Mussa.

legions of Italy in 1941, he already had the advantage of literacy in a country where illiteracy ranges over 90 per cent. His obvious intelligence, his leading tribal background, and his recognition as a leader by the British combined to give him a national position. The unknown British officer who sponsored the development of the Somali police along its present lines has left a remarkable--and hopefully durable--philosophy among the officers who now command the country's sole armed body. Mohammed Abshir is the spokesman for this group of men whom he numbers as six only, and the headquarters in which they work is crowned with a large neon sign saying (in Italian) "In the Service of the Law."

My early conversations with Mohammed Abshir during the ten days or so of festivities that I attended in Mogadiscio rather filled in this picture of a British heritage of police responsibility. We sat next to each other at dinner one evening and he explained why the police were involved in the Somali equivalent of amateur theatricals. The previous night there had been an entertainment given by the local police detachment--a series of skits.

"You see," he said, "not many of our people have any education and we [the police] feel that a knowledge of the law, and of the nonpolitical role of the police is an essential element of our country's development. So we have organized evenings where we act out situations showing the police in the role of friends, and explaining the law at the same time. It is preventive police work in which I am most interested."

Later, we discussed the desirability of establishing a Boys Town near Mogadiscio, a project suggested by the American Consul General which Mohammed Abshir had taken to wholeheartedly. The problem was financing, but the need was obvious. Youngsters of ten years or less, escaping from the nomadic families of the interior or from the primitive settled villages nearer the coast, found begging and pilferage easy in the city. By day they roamed the streets, by night they slept where they fell--the tropic climate makes it less a hardship than it might be elsewhere. To the perspicacious policeman, this potential reinforcement to an underworld was obvious in the background of an expanding urban population (Mogadiscio's population has doubled in the past decade; it numbers, together with those in the environs, perhaps more than a hundred thousand).

Aside from the political image that may fall to Mohammed Abshir in the coming days of Somali independence, he already has an urban crime problem of which he is painfully aware. Crimes of violence are frequent; the Somali is a quick man with a knife, and tribal wars are not yet things of the past. Twice in the past three months American women (a missionary and a Consulate clerk) have been attacked at night by marauding Somalis. When I asked Mohammed Abshir about this, he replied candidly:

"In one way," he said, "I can reply that such crimes happen daily in London or New York and why not here? But I do not deny that we have a serious problem. We must build an effective criminal investigation department, just as we must build a nation."

After the Italians returned in 1950 to administer the United Nations Trusteeship, Mohammed Abshir was sent to Italy to study and to receive further training with the Italian carabiniere, the high-standard national police. He returned to Somalia after a year, served in various areas of the country and was appointed commandant of police two years ago. As well as being a personality himself, he is also a part of Somalia's elite, one of perhaps a hundred and fifty Somalis in all who have in similar ways to his arrived at positions of authority in the new government. Most, although not all, received their first recognition from the British occupation authorities, and there is a surprisingly greater use of English among these officials than of Italian, although the Italians have been in Somalia for three-quarters of a century. The existence of British administration to the north and south of the territory, and the use of English as a second language in Ethiopia is, perhaps, only one important reason for this development.

Mohammed Abshir and I kept meeting during the week at various functions (the festivities concerning the university center were enlivened by a two-day visit of Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary-General of the United Nations) and we managed to develop a running conversation that became increasingly cordial and frank as the days went by. He asked me once what opinion I had formed about the university institute we were honoring. I replied that I hoped that Somalia would not rely totally upon Italian concepts of law and public administration, but would ultimately receive teaching and ideas from other societies as well.

"I agree completely," he said. Then he shrugged his shoulders and continued: "But for the moment we can do nothing. After independence, I hope that we will adopt the British system of justice more than at present. For example, trial by jury, rather than trial by examining magistrates is far more consistent with our native law. A trial, in our tribes, is conducted by the chief but with the elders of the tribe, all sitting under a tree, acting as a jury. The judge acts as a presiding officer only. Actually, our tribal government is in this sense democratic, for not even the Sultan (chief) is superior to any other elder."[1]

"Would not some of the European concepts of law be at variance with Islamic law?" I asked. Somalis are quick to point out that one of the important elements that make them a nation is the acceptance of Islam, which, with a common language not yet written, and the hard physical heritage of an extraordinarily unfavored territory of Africa with few resources seem to be the root ingredients of nationhood.

"I do not believe so. The job we must do is to keep as much of the old way of doing things as we can, merging it with Western ideas and techniques. After all, what we are doing already is a part of this process. We have had the Italians, and the British, and now the Americans giving us ideas."

He might have said that eclecticism had long been characteristic. Islam itself, as Christianity had found it necessary to do in Europe, had made its adjustments. The day before this conversation, 32 goats had been sacrificed in the harbor of Mogadiscio partly in celebration of a winter festival of ancient note, and at least partly to ward off an impending sandstorm that arrived the next day. It was not very effective, but the local Somalis had meat for dinner that night, and the local mullahs had not been offended.[2]

Our conversations had necessarily been somewhat fragmentary since we kept meeting at the large social functions that marked the week, so I asked Mohammed Abshir if we could have a private talk. He readily agreed and asked me to come to his office in police headquarters the morning I was to leave Somalia.[3] I wasn't quite certain where to find his office and as I left the city's one acceptable hotel I asked a constable if he could direct me to Mohammed Abshir's office. His response indicated that as a person who wished to see the commandant I must be an honored foreigner, and waving to a fellow policeman to cover his beat, he escorted me to headquarters. At the

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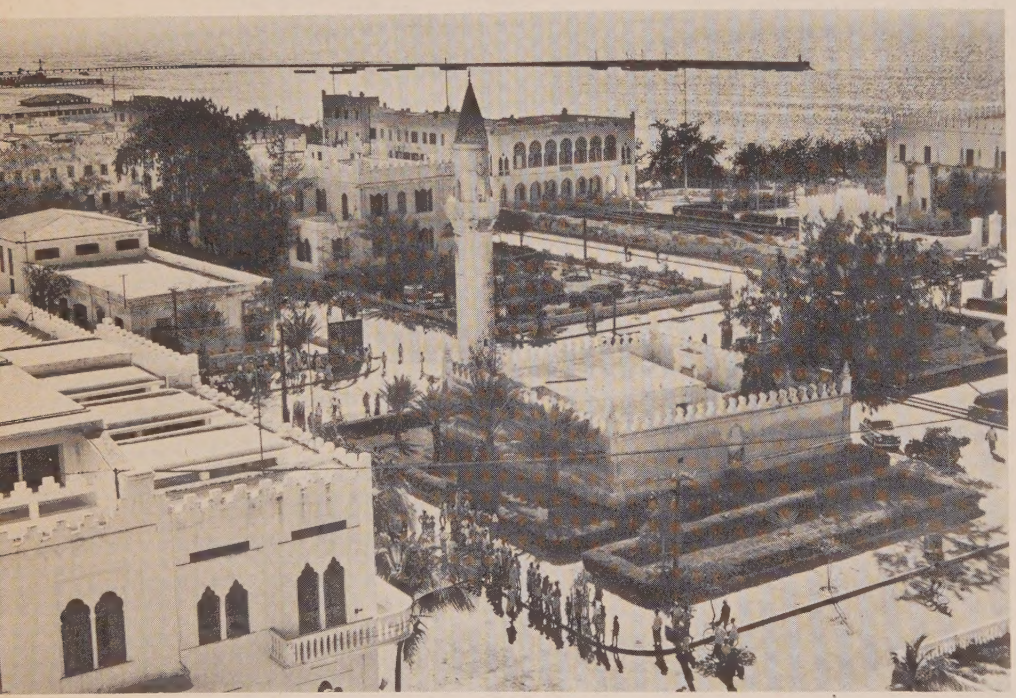
[1] While Sultans generally retain their primo inter pares position indefinitely, based upon hereditary acceptance, the elders are actually lineage clan heads representative of sub-clans of the tribe. A trial, or tribal conclave, is actually representative in the sense of a modern senate. The pattern applies to most, not all, Somali tribes.

[2] Sharia law does still, of course, have its place in daily life, in matters of marriage and divorce for example, and in the general application of morality. However, when I asked Somalis if a mullah would have the right to forbid the use of well water because it had been dug by an "infidel" (as has happened in Persia) I was told that the mullah would be run out of town, so precious is water. Somalia does not seem to be confronted with a serious church and state problem at this time.

[3] This report was written in Rome from data gathered in Africa over a period of several weeks in which the writer visited Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

office, as I was early, I had an opportunity to observe the disciplined but still easy atmosphere of police business. There was little of the behavior that is common to Italian government offices: the total lack of discipline or the pompous formality and institutionalized subservience that can be the despair of the efficiency conscious. Rather, I might have been in an American or British military establishment. When the higher officers arrived there was an appropriate salute at a momentary, but not ostentatious attention. Even the Italian adviser, a colonel of the carabiniere, who might have once been the master of absolute authority, was accorded the same reception by the lower ranks. It seemed that this was already more a Somali establishment than an Italian one. Mohammed Abshir, too, received the same treatment when he arrived, impeccably uniformed in starched khaki shorts and bush jacket.



A view of Mogadiscio's center.

We settled ourselves comfortably and cheerfully pitched into conversation immediately. I began by saying that while Somalia seemed a little more ready for an independent political existence than I had thought, I still had grave reservations about its ability to function as a smoothly working democracy. For one obvious thing, it was a fact that the elite of Somalia was a very small group and could be easily dominated once the Italian Trusteeship and the United Nations observers were removed. Moreover, it was logical that the man with power, in this case the police commandant, might be tempted to become the native trustee for the country.

Mohammed Abshir denied that he had any such ambition--"I want only to be a good policeman," he protested, "and you forget also, that there is not one officer who is building this force, but six of us, from different tribes, any one of whom could be sitting here today."

And then he spoke the words I have quoted at the beginning of this piece.

"I am not a politician, and I do not want to be one," he continued.

"It seems to me that you cannot avoid being involved in politics," I remarked. "Take the issue of an army for Somalia. How do you stand on that?"

"I have only a personal opinion," he said. But I pressed him because the Prime Minister had at least partially committed the government to a military force of at least five thousand men after independence without indicating where the funds would come from to support a budget already considerably in deficit. An army, however much "a newly arrived gentleman required gentleman's clothes" (as a Nigerian once described the need for a Nigerian army after independence), would be a rival to the police.

"I am opposed to it because it is unnecessary now."

The Somalia police strength is presently about 3,700 men, of which a thousand are designated as a mobile force, equipped with six-wheeled tanks, that is utilized to keep the peace between tribes who frequently enough will war with each other over water holes necessary for their herds of cattle or sheep. The mobile force also stands ready to defend the presently disputed borderline between Somalia and Ethiopia, and thus serves as an embryonic army.

"Is the present police force large enough to carry its responsibilities after independence?" I asked.

"I believe that we need at least a thousand more men to be assigned to the mobile force. This is a big country [approximately 220,000 squares miles, a little less than Oregon and California combined, with about 1.5 million people] and with increasing urban police problems and the development of the interior we will need an increased force."

"Won't this cost money?"

"Of course, but I believe that we can increase taxation. A tax on the number of cattle a man has is one we should try, better collection of the shamba tax [land tax] would help, although not an increase in rates. There are other ways too."

"There are some Somalis who believe that it is unhealthy politically to have only one armed force in the country, and that an army is a good counterbalance. Also, an army, raised by conscription might be an agency to develop national feeling beyond tribal loyalties. I gather that you don't agree?"

"Why? The police are already intertribal and so long as it has the

present leadership, there is no danger of political use. We have much more difficult problems facing us."

"What seem to be the most important ones to you," I asked.

He looked thoughtfully out the window for a moment and then enumerated.

"Of course, economic development of the country has the first priority. We need schools and roads and water development, and on the political side we have the problems of making a constitution. Externally," and he paused as if to give emphasis, "two elements seem the most difficult of all to me. The first is Ethiopia. We are never certain what they will do and we must be prepared. Second, the Russians. We have never had to deal with them before but it is certain that they will be here." And he smiled somewhat ruefully.

There are about 15 Somali students presently studying in Moscow (against several hundred in Europe and the United States). It must be assumed that Mohammed Abshir's concern about Russian activities in Somalia will have reality. The students may be assumed to offer a ready coterie of friends for the future Russian Embassy.

* * * * *

My talks with Mohammed Abshir were encouraging in assessing the modern leadership of the new Somalia--at least there were a few who grasped the responsibilities of statehood. A few out of a hundred or so into whose hands the United Nations would transmit the power of government next July. There are various kinds of corruption that can emerge--already there is financial corruption among the politicians of which Mohammed Abshir said: "It is a trend, and a trend that worries me"--and there is a corruption of power. His parting comment to me fitted in with all we had talked about, and into the image I had already formed of him:

"There will be plenty of work for the policeman after July," he said, "I hope you will come again then."

Whether I do or not, I am certain that I will be hearing about Mohammed Abshir.

E. A. Bayne

[Photos: Fotocine, Mogadiscio, and E. A. Bayne.]

APPENDIX I

Text of United Nations Resolution on the Independence of Somalia

The following text was passed by the General Assembly on December 18, 1959, having been drafted in the Trusteeship Council (Committee No. 4) during the month previous, and sponsored by Argentina, Canada, Iran, Eire, Japan, and the United States. The Council made attempts to clarify the Somalia-Ethiopia border question before submitting the resolution to the General Assembly but finally relinquished the effort in the hope that both parties "would persevere in their efforts to find a definitive solution."

The General Assembly,

Recalling the terms of article 24 of the Trusteeship Agreement with respect to the Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian administration (hereinafter referred to as Somalia) which provides that the Agreement shall cease to be in force ten years after the date of the approval of the Trusteeship Agreement by the General Assembly, at the conclusion of which the Territory shall become an independent sovereign State,

Recalling its resolution 442 (V) of 2 December 1950, by which it approved the Trusteeship Agreement,

Having considered the information submitted by the Administering Authority to the effect that the Government of Somalia has conveyed the wish expressed by the Legislative Assembly that the Trusteeship Agreement be terminated as soon as possible so that the Trust Territory may achieve independence at a date earlier than 2 December 1960, as well as the statement of the representative of the Italian Government that the Administering Authority is prepared to support this wish,

Having heard the statements made by the Chairman of the United Nations Advisory Council for Somalia,

Having heard the views of the petitioners,

Noting the wish expressed by the Government of Somalia that, as soon as possible after the date of attainment of its independence, Somalia should be admitted to membership in the United Nations, and noting further that the Government of Italy has expressed its readiness to sponsor the application that will be made by the Government of Somalia to be admitted to membership in the United Nations,

1. Takes note of the statements made by the representative of Italy and the representative of the Government of Somalia that the preparations for independence will be completed by 1 July 1960 and that independence will be proclaimed on that date;

2. Congratulates the Government of Italy, as Administering Authority, and the Government and the people of Somalia on taking steps in order to attain the basic objectives of the International Trusteeship System in advance of 2 December 1960;

3. Expresses its appreciation for the aid and advice provided by the United Nations Advisory Council for Somalia to the Administering Authority and also to the Government and people of Somalia in their progress towards independence;

4. Expresses its confidence that the recommendations and observations of the Trusteeship Council, which have been accepted by the Administering Authority and by the Government of Somalia, concerning the broadening of the composition of the Political Committee and the Constituent Assembly, a popular confirmation of the constitution now under preparation through a referendum, and a modification of the existing electoral law will be implemented before the date on which the Trusteeship Agreement is terminated, and that the Administering Authority will furnish a report on the implementation of these recommendations to the Trusteeship Council at its twenty-sixth session;

5. Resolves accordingly, in agreement with the Administering Authority, that on 1 July 1960, when Somalia shall become independent, the Trusteeship Agreement approved by the General Assembly on 2 December 1950 shall cease to be in force, the basic objectives of trusteeship having been attained;

6. Recommends that, upon the attainment of independence, Somalia shall be admitted to membership in the United Nations in accordance with Article 4 of the Charter of the United Nations.

846th plenary meeting,
5 December 1959.

APPENDIX II

Short Bibliography

Probably the most recent and comprehensive Anglo-Italian bibliography on Somalia was published by the Somali Chamber of Commerce in 1958, for the first commercial fair held in Mogadiscio following World War II. (Bibliografia Somala, Camera di Commercio Industria ed Agricultura, Mogadiscio, paper, 138 pp.) However, I have found the following useful in developing background on the problems of the Horn of Africa and particularly of Somalia:

Somalia, edited by Enrico Cerulli, 2 volumes published (1957) by the Instituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome. Much of this is in English as well as in Italian and contains considerable anthropological and historical material of reliable scholarship.

Report of the United Nations Advisory Council for the Trust Territory of Somalia under Italian Administration, March 31, 1959, United Nations document A/AC.33/Misc. 103, New York. This, with a previous report dated December 4, 1957 (UN document T/1344, New York) gives a carefully documented play-by-play picture of political and economic progress during the last few years of the trusteeship.

Report of the Italian Government to the General Assembly on the Trust Administration of Somalia, 1958, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome. This is a comprehensive book, with maps and profuse charts which provides as good a summary of Somali statistics and governmental organization as any source. It tends to gild the lily of Italian Administration, but is highly useful for all this pardonable lack of objectivity. In French, Italian, and English, published in June 1959.

From Tribal Rule to Modern Government, edited by Raymond Apthorpe, published (1959) by the Rhodes-Livingston Institute, Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia. The symposium contains a thorough survey of the Somali political situation written by I. M. Lewis, who is presently preparing a book on the anthropological background of self-government in both British Somaliland and Somalia.

The Government of Ethiopia, by Margery Perham, London, 1948. Although published a decade ago, it remains a classic text on Ethiopia and the problems of the Horn of Africa.

The Horn of Africa, by John Buchholzer, London, 1959. This is a contemporary travel book written by a Danish journalist who made a safari through the interior of the Somali territory last year, living in native style. It is disappointingly slight, but colorful.

British Policy in Changing Africa, by Sir Andrew Cohen, Evanston, 1959. Sir Andrew gave a series of lectures at Northwestern University in 1958 which are here published. With rewarding simplicity, the objectives of British colonial policy are stated without making specific references to the Horn of Africa.

Report of the Mission to the Trust Territory of Somaliland, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington, 1958, mimeo. This study, while not in the IBRD's regular series of country studies, represents the same high quality research and analysis, and probably is the best economic study available. It is somewhat dated in its figures, which tends to give it an extremely cautious and even negative outlook, while current statistics would indicate a slightly more hopeful deepening of the economy.